

## A LOOK BACK AT THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN NURSES IN THE NAVY

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From the dawn of the U.S Navy, African-Americans have played a vital role in its history and have embodied the basic tenets of service and commitment to duty. At the same time, the African-American experience in naval history is a story about breaking barriers, living through a segregated service, and overcoming limitations of opportunity on the path to what Admiral Elmo “Bud” Zumwalt called “One Navy.”

During the Civil War, African-Americans comprised twenty-five percent of the total naval force; not included in this statistic were five African-American women (Alice Kennedy, Sarah Kinno, Ellen Campbell, Betsy Young, and Dennis[e] Downs) who served as nurses aboard the Navy’s “first” hospital ship, USS *Red Rover* in 1863. Although only volunteers, it is remarkable to note that for over the next century these women would represent the Navy’s only black nurses.

Mixed crews were common in the Navy until “Jim Crow” state laws become the policy of the service. From 1922 to 1942, blacks were barred from serving as anything but mess attendants or stewards. Four months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt called for the end of the Navy’s discriminatory policies. On April 7, 1942, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox announced that the Navy would start accepting enlistment of blacks in ratings other than messmen. By 1943, African-Americans were finally allowed to serve as Hospital Corpsmen; and by March 1944 blacks—following the lead of the “Golden Thirteen”—were allowed to serve as dentists, physicians, as well as Hospital Corps officers.

After October 1944, black women were permitted to serve as reserve officers in administrative capacities. Ironically, the Navy Nurse Corps, which had long battled for gender equality within the Navy establishment, would be the last to open its doors to African-Americans.

Since being established in May 1908 the Navy Nurse Corps had a history of barring married women, single mothers, and men into its ranks on a permanent basis. And although black nurses were not officially prohibited from entering the services after 1944, they were often “overlooked” in Army, Navy and Red Cross recruiting drives until early 1945.



Phyllis Mae Daley taking the oath in March 1945.

First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and Mable Keaton Staupers, Executive Secretary of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses were among the most vocal critics of the implicit “ban” on black nurses. A longtime advocate for racial equality in the nursing profession, Staupers wrote that military service was the responsibility for all citizens of the United States, especially during a time of war.

On March 8, 1945, the longstanding barrier in the Navy was finally broken when a 25-year old New York-born nurse named Phyllis Mae Daley received a commission in the U.S. Navy Reserve. A graduate of Lincoln School of Nursing in New York and student of public health at Teachers College, Columbia University, Daley had previously been rejected from entering the Army Air Force. Determined to serve,